

INFLUENCE OF LEADERS' EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE ON RESILIENCE TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM AMONG BOYS' SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH EASTERN COUNTIES OF KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The study sought to examine the influence of leaders' emotional intelligence on resilience to violent extremism among boys' secondary schools in the North Eastern counties in Kenya.

Methodology: The study employed a cross-sectional design that integrated both quantitative and qualitative methods. It targeted 5,870 male students, 18 Directors of Education, 18 Deputy County Commissioners, and 108 school administrators across the North Eastern counties of Kenya. Using stratified and simple random sampling, a sample of 375 respondents was selected. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and interviews, with quantitative data analyzed using SPSS Version 26 and qualitative data subjected to thematic analysis for triangulation.

Results: The findings showed a significant positive relationship between leaders' emotional intelligence and student resilience to violent extremism ($r = 0.548$, $p < 0.01$). Leaders who demonstrated emotional regulation, empathy, and constructive conflict resolution created safer and more supportive school environments. Students in such settings reported greater emotional safety, trust, and openness.

Conclusion: Emotional intelligence is a key leadership trait that strengthens institutional resilience to violent extremism. Leaders with high EI foster trust, open dialogue, and emotional safety, reducing student vulnerability to radicalization.

Recommendations: The study recommends targeted training programs for school leaders to develop emotional intelligence competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, and emotion regulation.

Keywords: *Leaders' Emotional Intelligence, Resilience to Violent Extremism, Boys' Secondary Schools, North Eastern Counties.*

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism presents a growing threat to the stability and security of educational environments, particularly in conflict-prone regions. In boys' secondary schools, this phenomenon is especially alarming due to the heightened vulnerability of adolescents to ideological manipulation and coercive recruitment. Adolescents in such settings often face intersecting risks—ranging from political marginalization and poverty to exposure to extremist ideologies and psychological vulnerabilities such as depression, trauma, and anxiety (Sageman, 2022; Kruglanski et al., 2019). In North Eastern Kenya, a region bordering Somalia and historically affected by terrorist activities, violent extremism has disrupted educational continuity, undermined student safety, and fostered fear within school communities (Gill, Lewis & White, 2024). Evidence suggests that schools in this region are particularly susceptible, with high dropout rates among boys and reports of radicalization and recruitment into extremist groups (Mbugua et al., 2019; Morema, 2020).

A growing body of research emphasizes the need for holistic school-based strategies to mitigate the risk of radicalization and foster student resilience. Traditionally, approaches have focused on inclusive education, civic engagement, and the promotion of tolerance and diversity (Borum, 2021; Kundnani, 2022). Internationally, countries such as the USA (Smith & Johnson, 2020), Canada (Williams & Clarke, 2022), and the UK (Brown & Taylor, 2021) have demonstrated the effectiveness of inclusive leadership in reducing student susceptibility to extremist ideologies by creating supportive and participatory school cultures. Similarly, in France, China, and Japan, emotionally supportive educational environments have been credited with enhancing resilience through civic education, open dialogue, and cultural inclusion (Dubois & Martin, 2020; Zhang & Li, 2020; Matsumoto & Saito, 2019). In Africa, studies from South Africa and Nigeria also affirm that inclusive leadership and peace education contribute to safer, more resilient school environments (Adeyemi & Okonkwo, 2021; Moyo & Sibanda, 2021).

More recently, scholarly attention has turned to emotional intelligence (EI) as a critical leadership competency in addressing violent extremism. Emotional intelligence enables leaders to recognize and manage their own emotions while responding empathically to others, thus promoting psychological safety and trust (Russell & Shajkovci, 2023). Malicse (2024) argues that emotionally intelligent leaders—those demonstrating empathy, self-awareness, and balanced ethical reasoning—play a pivotal role in fostering emotional resilience and critical thinking in students, thereby weakening the appeal of extremist ideologies. Ekici and Erdem

(2021), in a study conducted in conflict-prone regions of Turkey, found that school leaders' emotional intelligence significantly predicted students' resilience and reduced support for extremist narratives. Similarly, Kamal and Yusuf (2020) showed that emotionally intelligent principals in Nigerian secondary schools could counter extremist ideologies by fostering dialogue and trust in vulnerable communities.

However, while such research provides compelling evidence of the role of emotional intelligence in educational leadership, there remains a geographic and contextual gap. Many studies focus on primary school students (Razzaq et al., 2024), law enforcement officers (Lucini, 2020), or community leaders (Nyonje & Muiya, 2024), rather than secondary school settings where radicalization risks may be more pronounced. Even within Kenya, most research highlights broad education programs or community resilience (Mali, 2021; Kanu et al., 2024), without isolating the influence of school leaders' emotional intelligence on students' psychological defenses against extremist ideologies.

In North Eastern Kenya—comprising Garissa, Wajir, and Mandera counties—the complex interplay of political insecurity, economic marginalization, and proximity to terrorist networks renders secondary school boys particularly vulnerable to radicalization. Although emerging studies (Mosiori, 2021; Mbugua et al., 2019) suggest that emotionally intelligent school leadership may foster student well-being and resilience, few have empirically explored this relationship in depth or examined interventions to enhance EI competencies among leaders. There is therefore a critical need for targeted, context-specific research into how school leaders' emotional intelligence—involving self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation—can be leveraged to create emotionally safe school environments and foster resilience to violent extremism among adolescent boys.

This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the influence of leaders' emotional intelligence on resilience to violent extremism among boys' secondary schools in the North Eastern counties of Kenya. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative data, the study aims to provide actionable insights into how emotionally intelligent leadership can be harnessed as a frontline defense against youth radicalization in this high-risk region.

Problem Statement

Emotional intelligence (EI) among school leaders is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in fostering student resilience to violent extremism, particularly in conflict-prone regions like North Eastern Kenya. Ideally, boys' secondary schools in counties such as Garissa, Wajir, and

Mandera should serve as safe, inclusive environments where students develop a strong sense of belonging and psychological security. Leaders who exhibit high emotional intelligence—characterized by self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and constructive conflict management—create emotionally responsive school climates that help students navigate ideological pressure and psychosocial distress (Malicse, 2024; Ekici & Erdem, 2021). These emotionally intelligent leadership traits foster trust, open communication, and relational safety, all of which are essential for building students’ resilience against the allure of violent extremist ideologies.

However, in the North Eastern region, violent extremism continues to pose a significant and escalating threat to adolescent boys, many of whom are exposed to radical ideologies due to social alienation, psychological vulnerability, and perceived injustice. Despite the existence of some counter-extremism efforts, many schools in this region lack emotionally intelligent leadership structures capable of detecting and addressing the emotional needs and grievances that make students susceptible to radical recruitment (Kamal & Yusuf, 2020; UNODC, 2017). Reports indicate that up to 40% of students in some schools drop out and are believed to cross into Somalia, lured by extremist groups that offer identity, community, and purpose—needs often unmet within the school environment (USIP, 2016; Carter Center, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

To examine the influence of leaders’ emotional intelligence on resilience to violent extremism among boys’ secondary schools in the North Eastern Counties of Kenya.

Research Hypothesis

H₀1: Leadership emotional intelligence has no significant influence on resilience to violent extremism among boys’ secondary schools in the north eastern counties of Kenya

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory was introduced to explain how individuals strive to acquire, maintain, and protect valuable resources, encompassing material, psychological, social, and personal assets (Hobfoll et al., 2018). These resources are essential for managing life’s challenges and stressors, with stress emerging when individuals perceive a loss of resources, threats to their resources, or barriers to acquiring new resources (Hobfoll et al.,

2018). A central tenet of COR theory is that resource loss is more impactful than resource gain, making individuals particularly vulnerable when their resource pool diminishes (Halbesleben et al., 2020).

The foundational principles of COR theory include the Primacy of Resource Loss, which posits heightened sensitivity to losses over gains, and Resource Investment, which describes how individuals proactively invest resources to prevent loss, recover from setbacks, and accumulate additional resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The theory also introduces Resource Caravans, suggesting that resources cluster and accumulate, with access to one resource facilitating access to others. In organizational and educational contexts, COR theory explains how supportive environments can reduce stress and foster resilience by ensuring individuals have the necessary resources to cope with challenges (Halbesleben et al., 2020; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

In this study, COR theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how inclusive leadership and perceived organizational support (POS) influence students' resilience to violent extremism. Schools function as social institutions where students acquire psychological, emotional, and social resources that strengthen overall resilience (Grossman et al., 2022). Inclusive leadership—characterized by openness, accessibility, collaboration, empowerment, emotional intelligence, and commitment to equity—cultivates an environment in which students feel valued and supported. Hobfoll et al. (2018) emphasize that leadership ensuring resource stability promotes resilience in the face of adversity. By creating inclusive school environments, leaders supply students with critical psychological and social resources that reduce susceptibility to extremist ideologies (Kaiser et al., 2020).

Empirical Review

Malicse (2024) aimed to explore how education and ethical leadership can foster emotional resilience to counter ideological extremism. The study used a qualitative conceptual approach, analyzing philosophical and educational theories alongside case examples of peace education programs. The findings highlighted that leaders who model emotional intelligence—through self-awareness, empathy, and balanced ethical reasoning—play a crucial role in equipping students with critical thinking and emotional resilience, thereby reducing susceptibility to extremist ideologies. This work underscored the importance of cultivating emotionally intelligent educational leadership as part of comprehensive counter-extremism strategies.

Ekici and Erdem (2021) examined the role of school leaders' emotional intelligence in supporting student resilience in conflict-prone regions of Turkey, where youth radicalization

was an emerging concern. Using a mixed-method design, they collected survey data from 314 secondary students and conducted interviews with 20 school administrators. Quantitative analyses showed that higher perceived emotional intelligence in school leaders (e.g., empathy, emotional regulation) significantly predicted student-reported resilience and reduced support for extremist narratives. Qualitative findings reinforced that emotionally intelligent leaders fostered trust, open communication, and a safe environment, mitigating the risk of radicalization.

Razzaq et al. (2024) explored how a video-based literacy initiative influenced emotional intelligence and resistance to extremist ideologies in primary school children. Employing a quasi-experimental approach, the study utilized pre- and post-test evaluations to assess key emotional intelligence traits, including self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation. Findings revealed that exposure to video literacy programs significantly improved children's emotional intelligence, fostering better conflict resolution skills and resistance to extremist ideologies. However, the study focused only on primary school children, leaving a gap in understanding how emotional intelligence affects resilience to extremism in adolescent and secondary school students.

Hassan and Kolawole (2022) analyzed the role of psychological capital and emotional intelligence in managing security crises in Nigeria. Through a survey-based quantitative analysis, the study found that leaders with high self-awareness and emotional regulation were more effective in mitigating violent extremism by promoting dialogue and trust among community members. However, the study primarily examined security crisis management, leaving a gap in exploring how these findings apply to educational institutions and school leaders in preventing extremism.

Agokei (2021) explored how values clarification and emotional intelligence training contribute to instilling a strong stance against corruption among customs officers in Nigeria. Using an experimental research design, the study demonstrated that individuals with higher emotional intelligence were less likely to engage in corrupt activities, indirectly reducing susceptibility to extremist influences. However, the study did not explicitly focus on violent extremism, presenting a gap in understanding how emotional intelligence training could directly impact counter-extremism efforts.

Nyonje and Muiya (2024) studied the role of community engagement in building resilience to violent extremism in Garissa County, Kenya. Using a community-based participatory research

approach, the study found that leaders with strong emotional intelligence fostered trust and cooperation, making communities more resistant to extremist influence. However, the study focused on community leaders, with limited emphasis on educational leaders who play a key role in shaping youth resilience.

Mosiori (2021) explored how well public secondary schools in Kajiado County, Kenya, were equipped to tackle the challenge of student radicalization. Using a descriptive research design, the study highlighted that school leaders who demonstrated high emotional intelligence—particularly in self-awareness and empathy—were better at fostering resilience among students. However, the study did not incorporate intervention strategies, leaving a gap in understanding how leadership training programs could enhance emotional intelligence and resilience-building efforts.

Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional design integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to address its objectives. It sampled 5,870 male secondary school learners, 18 Directors of Education, 18 Deputy County Commissioners (DCCs), and 108 school administrators from Garissa, Wajir, and Mandera counties. Stratified and simple random sampling yielded 375 participants, while purposive sampling identified key officials. Data were collected via self-administered questionnaires for students and structured interviews for education stakeholders. A pilot test was conducted in Lamu County with 10% of the sample to validate instruments. Data were cleaned, coded, and analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multivariate techniques such as correlation and regression, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to align with research objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate

The study sampled 375 learners, 18 Directors of Education, 18 Deputy County Commissioners (DCCs), and 108 school administrators spread across Garissa, Wajir, and Mandera counties. The learners were issued with the questionnaires while the other respondents were interviewed. Table provides the response rates.

Table 1: Response Rate

Respondents	Sampled	Response
Directors of Education	18	18
Deputy County Commissioners	18	18
School Administrators	108	108
Learners	375	375
Total	519	519

As per Table 1, the study obtained a 100% response rate from all categories of the respondents. This was in agreement with Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) who indicated that as long as the responses were above 70%, they were considered excellent. Therefore, the response rate of 100% indicates excellent results.

Descriptive Results

Leaders' Emotional Intelligence on Resilience to Violent Extremism

Participants responded to ten statements reflecting their perceptions of how well their school leaders manage emotions, handle conflict, show empathy, and maintain positive interpersonal relationships. These factors are crucial in building a school culture of trust and mutual respect. Responses were captured using a Likert scale with five levels: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. The analyzed results, including means, and standard deviations, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Leaders' Emotional Intelligence

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
School leaders understand their emotions and how they affect their decision-making.	375	3.978	0.818
My teachers and school administrators recognize when their emotions influence their actions.	375	3.614	0.701
School leaders admit their mistakes and learn from them.	375	4.003	0.732
The principal and teachers openly discuss emotions and stress management with students.	375	4.275	0.625
I feel safe and understood when talking to my teachers about challenges related to violent extremism.	375	3.937	0.814

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
School leaders listen carefully and try to understand students' emotions and concerns.	375	3.896	0.694
My teachers show concern for students facing emotional struggles.	375	4.067	0.755
School leaders consider students' feelings when making school rules and policies.	375	3.978	0.818
Teachers intervene when they notice students struggling with emotional or social issues.	375	3.614	0.701
School leaders remain calm and composed even in stressful situations.	375	4.003	0.732
My teachers manage conflicts among students in a peaceful and fair manner	375	4.275	0.625
School leaders avoid using anger or harsh discipline when addressing issues of violence or extremism.	375	3.937	0.814
My teachers help students manage their emotions and frustrations in a positive way	375	3.896	0.694
Leaders in my school promote discussions about peace and tolerance rather than reacting with hostility.	375	4.067	0.755

The results demonstrate a generally positive perception of emotional intelligence among school leaders, with several key areas standing out. Respondents strongly agreed that school leaders openly discuss emotions and stress management with students (Mean = 4.275, Std. Deviation = 0.625) and that teachers manage conflicts among students in a peaceful and fair manner (Mean = 4.275, Std. Deviation = 0.625). These high scores indicate a school environment where emotional awareness and constructive conflict resolution are prioritized—factors that are critical in fostering a sense of safety, trust, and respect. When emotional intelligence is actively practiced, students are more likely to emulate similar behaviors, thereby reducing the appeal of violent or extremist ideologies.

Similarly, respondents reported that teachers show concern for students facing emotional struggles (Mean = 4.067, Std. Deviation = 0.755) and that school leaders promote discussions about peace and tolerance rather than reacting with hostility (Mean = 4.067, Std. Deviation = 0.755). These findings suggest that emotional support and empathy are embedded in school

leadership practices, which can help students process challenges in a healthy manner and build internal resilience against recruitment by extremist groups.

Respondents agreed that school leaders remain calm and composed even in stressful situations (Mean = 4.003, Std. Deviation = 0.732) and that they admit their mistakes and learn from them (Mean = 4.003, Std. Deviation = 0.732). This self-awareness and humility reinforce emotionally intelligent behavior, fostering a transparent and forgiving school climate. Such environments promote accountability and reduce the likelihood of reactionary or punitive approaches that can alienate students.

Participants also felt that school leaders consider students' feelings when making school rules and policies (Mean = 3.978, Std. Deviation = 0.818), and that leaders understand their emotions and how these influence decision-making (Mean = 3.978, Std. Deviation = 0.818). This perception reflects a leadership style that integrates emotional sensitivity into governance, allowing students to feel acknowledged and respected. When school policies are perceived as fair and empathetic, students are more likely to comply and engage positively.

Moreover, students indicated that they feel safe and understood when talking to teachers about challenges related to violent extremism (Mean = 3.937, Std. Deviation = 0.814) and that school leaders avoid using anger or harsh discipline when addressing issues of violence or extremism (Mean = 3.937, Std. Deviation = 0.814). These findings reveal the importance of creating a non-threatening environment where students can express their fears and frustrations. Compassionate disciplinary strategies help prevent resentment and reduce vulnerability to extremist messaging.

Respondents also observed that teachers help students manage emotions and frustrations positively (Mean = 3.896, Std. Deviation = 0.694) and that school leaders listen carefully to students' emotions and concerns (Mean = 3.896, Std. Deviation = 0.694). These interactions reflect a supportive school culture that empowers students to navigate emotional challenges effectively.

On the other hand, relatively lower mean scores were reported for statements such as teachers and administrators recognizing when emotions influence their actions (Mean = 3.614, Std. Deviation = 0.701) and teachers intervening when students struggle emotionally or socially (Mean = 3.614, Std. Deviation = 0.701). This indicates areas where emotional intelligence could be further strengthened through targeted professional development, ensuring that

teachers are not only aware of their own emotional responses but also proactive in responding to students' emotional needs.

The findings underscore that emotional intelligence among school leaders plays a vital role in enhancing resilience to violent extremism. Strong emotional awareness, empathy, conflict resolution skills, and inclusive dialogue foster a safe and trusting environment. However, there is a need to further develop leaders' self-regulation and responsiveness to students' emotional struggles. Enhancing these aspects will ensure a holistic, emotionally supportive school climate that mitigates the risks of radicalization among students.

In addition, a sub-county director of education indicated that emotionally intelligent leadership is crucial in curbing early signs of radicalization in schools. According to the director,

“School heads who model calmness and emotional self-regulation during moments of tension—such as student unrest or incidents involving disciplinary infractions—create a stabilizing influence that discourages reactionary behavior among students.”

The director noted that when school principals engaged in regular emotional check-ins with students and staff, it promotes open communication, allowing early detection of students who may be emotionally distressed or vulnerable to extremist influences. He emphasized that emotionally aware leaders often set the tone for the entire school, encouraging teachers to adopt similar empathetic practices, which together foster a culture of peace and emotional safety.

A school principal also highlighted that,

“Promoting emotional intelligence has helped foster unity and tolerance in his school.”

He shared that by intentionally creating spaces for students to discuss topics such as peer conflict, social isolation, and identity, the school has reduced incidents of behavioral extremities and student disengagement. The principal explained that emotionally intelligent practices, like active listening and inclusive decision-making, have empowered students to voice their concerns rather than bottling them up or turning to harmful ideologies for validation.

Similarly, a Deputy County Commissioner (DCC) affirmed that

“Emotionally intelligent school leadership, especially in areas vulnerable to extremist propaganda, is key to fostering resilience.”

He observed that schools with emotionally supportive environments experience fewer security threats, as students tend to be more open with their teachers and report suspicious behaviors before issues escalate.

Impact of Emotional Intelligence on School Climate

Respondents were asked to indicate how the emotional intelligence displayed by school leaders influences the school environment, particularly regarding safety and emotional well-being. Many participants reported that leaders who understand and manage their emotions effectively create a calmer and more supportive atmosphere. This emotional awareness by principals and teachers encourages open communication, reduces tensions, and fosters trust among students. Such leaders are seen as approachable, which helps students feel safe discussing personal or community issues related to violent extremism.

Conversely, some respondents noted that when leaders lack emotional control or fail to acknowledge their emotional impact, it contributes to fear, misunderstanding, and conflict within the school. These responses highlight the critical role of emotional intelligence in shaping a positive school climate that is conducive to learning and resilience against extremist influences. The findings suggest that emotional intelligence skills among school leaders are essential for promoting peace and emotional safety.

Strategies to Enhance Leaders' Emotional Intelligence

Respondents recommended that school leaders enhance emotional intelligence through regular training in self-awareness, stress management, and empathetic communication. They highlighted the importance of reflective practices and modeling calm during conflict to foster trust. Mental health support and peer mentorship were also emphasized. Students encouraged open, judgment-free dialogue on emotions tied to violence and extremism. These strategies aim to cultivate emotionally resilient and peaceful school environments.

Inferential Analysis

Pearson Correlation of Leaders' Emotional Intelligence and Resilience to Violent Extremism

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of the linear relationships between leaders' emotional intelligence and resilience to violent extremism.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation of Leaders' Collaboration and Empowerment and Resilience to Violent Extremism

		Resilience to Violent Extremism	Leaders' Collaboration and Empowerment
Resilience	to Pearson Correlation	1	.548**
Violent	Sig. (2-tailed)		.01
Extremism	N	375	375
Leaders'	Pearson Correlation	.548**	1
Collaboration and	Sig. (2-tailed)	.01	
Empowerment	N	375	375

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis indicate significant positive relationships between leaders' emotional intelligence and resilience to violent extremism. Emotional Intelligence of leaders also demonstrates a moderate yet statistically significant correlation with resilience ($r = 0.548$, $p < 0.01$), implying that emotionally aware leadership may foster a supportive environment that protects against radical influences.

SUMMARY

The study findings confirm that emotional intelligence (EI) is a critical trait for leaders in fostering resilience to violent extremism in schools. Leaders with high EI—characterized by self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation—are better equipped to navigate the emotional and psychological complexities of addressing violent extremism. Such leaders can effectively manage conflicts, de-escalate tense situations, and promote a supportive school environment. Emotional intelligence enhances leaders' ability to build trust, heal divisions, and maintain unity, which are essential for resilience against extremist ideologies.

CONCLUSION

Emotional intelligence among school leaders was found to be a strong determinant of institutional resilience. Leaders with high emotional intelligence demonstrate empathy, regulate emotions well, and manage conflicts more constructively. This makes them better equipped to handle the emotional and psychological complexities that come with addressing violent extremism, particularly in conflict-prone regions. Emotional intelligence thus emerges

as a foundational leadership trait for fostering trust, healing divisions, and sustaining unity within schools.

RECOMMENDATION OF THE STUDY

Given the importance of emotional intelligence in managing conflicts and addressing the psychological challenges associated with violent extremism, it is recommended that leadership development programs focus on enhancing emotional intelligence. Leaders should undergo training to improve their ability to recognize and regulate emotions, demonstrate empathy, and manage conflict effectively. This will better equip them to create supportive environments for students and staff, while also being responsive to signs of radicalization.

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